



Metropolitan Waterfront Alliance

MWA Research and Policy Directions

Reconnect to Our Harbor

Public Access for People and Boats
and Everything in Between

April 2013



The Metropolitan Waterfront Alliance works to transform the New York and New Jersey Harbor and Waterways to make them cleaner and more accessible, a vibrant place to play, learn and work with great parks, great jobs and great transportation for all. For more information, please visit www.waterfrontalliance.org.

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Metropolitan Waterfront Alliance

241 Water Street, 3rd Floor

New York, NY 10038

212-935-9831 Office

www.waterfrontalliance.org



Reconnect to Our Harbor

Introduction

Recent years have witnessed a changing attitude toward the waterfront. New York City's landmark *Comprehensive Waterfront Plan* published in March 2011 calls for the creation of a sustainable blue network and more activity and economic opportunities at and on the waterfront. Magnificent new parks and rejuvenated waterfront neighborhoods have opened access to the City's edge, while waterborne transportation and recreation have helped redefine New Yorkers' relationship to their waterways. As water quality has vastly improved, more and more people are interested in getting not only to the water's edge, but onto and into the water.

Nevertheless, we still have a ways to go. Some of our waterfront parks are situated in wealthier neighborhoods, or are located in areas hard to reach from the outer boroughs. Too often, existing waterfront parks and even some entire waterfront neighborhoods lack any infrastructure that would allow boats to dock or pick up passengers. The many historic, educational, and cultural vessels that call the harbor home have, in fact, very few places to tie up, particularly in the outer boroughs. The relatively few piers that exist are too often designed for non-maritime uses such as pedestrian access or sports; fundamental elements at the sides of the piers that could allow for docking are missing or shortsightedly designed to only accommodate one type of boat.

This paper calls upon the City's next wave of leadership to commit to and accelerate the revitalization of New York's waterfront. Restoring piers, constructing new docks, opening beaches, expanding ferry service, and developing more opportunities for human-powered boating will connect New Yorkers to the water while simultaneously achieving critical economic, recreational, educational and environmental goals.



Challenges to Waterfront Access on New York Harbor

While public waterfront access has expanded dramatically in recent years, a number of constraints exist that continue to limit the extent to which New Yorkers can enjoy their wealth of waterways.

1. Dearth of coastal infrastructure

The City's coastline lacks sufficient infrastructure to fully optimize the use of its edge. For instance, just 20 community boathouses serve the maritime recreational and educational demand of more than 8 million New Yorkers, while, of the City's 220 miles of shorefront parkland, only a handful of sites are accessible by boat.

2. Insufficient accommodations for tall ships and historic vessels

Historic and tall ships in New York City face a perennial lack of appropriately configured and accessible berthing space. In fact, the entire East River waterfront north of Newtown Creek houses just two docking sites for historic and cultural vessels.

3. Complicated permitting requirements

Burdened with a complex web of jurisdictional authority, waterfront developments face particularly onerous obstacles. Today, more than 14 agencies have a regulatory role in the protection of the NY/NJ Harbor Estuary and are charged with the difficult task of balancing economic, social, and ecological values. The perception of many applicants and maritime stakeholders is that the New York waterfront permitting system is complicated and unpredictable. The permitting process is so involved that even the most sophisticated landowners and waterfront developers are confounded by the process.

The proper administration of the regulations and the protection of the environmental interests throughout the region is critical for the New York City waterfront. It is our hope that regulatory agencies align their work with the aspirations that so many New Yorkers share for a revitalized harbor, connected to the many neighborhoods that have been historically cut off from their waterfront. Too much time and energy has been spent focusing on the small areas of conflict and not enough on the much larger areas of agreement such as preservation of water-dependent maritime jobs, preservation of wetlands, and providing access to the water.

4. Inadequate transportation to the waterfront

Many waterfront neighborhoods lack connectivity to the City's public transit network, discouraging New Yorkers from visiting waterfront parks, from exploring their coastline and limiting waterfront development potential. Bus lines don't go near waterfront parks and one must walk a long way from the closest subway station to any stretch of the waterfront. Often, people are not aware that the waterfront is a part of their neighborhood.

5. There is a perception that public access is incompatible with upland uses such as those in maritime industrial areas.

The waterfront is a vital resource in gritty waterfront neighborhoods lacking open space and recreation facilities. Some of these same neighborhoods, however, host waterfront industry and municipal operations. The perception among property owners as well as some community members is that waterfront access is not possible. The result is that the community is cut off from its waterfront entirely.

6. Insufficient funding

In an era of chronic budget cuts, funding for even the most essential city services can be difficult to secure. Park funding is typically scarce, but waterfront parks—saddled with additional expenses including premium waterfront real estate, coastal infrastructure, and environmental conservation measures—can be particularly costly to construct and maintain. Even when funding is available, red tape and bureaucratic delay can hamper efforts to finish waterfront projects.

Recommendations for Improving Waterfront Access

1. Construct public town docks, or “Community Eco Docks,” and promote and fund human powered boating infrastructure.

Unlike the fixed piers and ferry landings located along the waterfront, Community Eco Docks are floating docks that rise and fall with the tide, making them accessible to all types of vessels at all times. Their flexibility, cost-effectiveness to build and maintain, environmental benefits, and potential to promote local economic development and community programming make them almost universally approved by city agencies such as the New York City Departments of Environmental Conservation, Parks and Recreation, and Planning, and by community organizations, businesses and New York City residents alike. Constructing Eco Docks in waterfront neighborhoods across the City will create considerable opportunities for maritime education and recreation. Community Eco Docks can give waterfront communities with very little access to the waterfront almost instant opportunity to host the many educational, cultural, and historic vessels that offer rides, tours, and educational programs. The docks include a platform that allows kayaks and other human powered boats to easily access the water. Boathouses and kayak platforms should be considered as a part of every new development.



The New York City Department of Parks and Recreation and/or nonprofit community groups should receive sufficient funding to help manage and run new Community Eco Docks, new boat houses. The City should work directly with community groups to develop new boat houses, Community Eco Docks, kayak platforms to provide kayaking and human powered boating to waterfront communities.

2. Build multi-use waterfront facilities for recreation, transit, and economic development opportunities.

According to the Comprehensive Waterfront Plan, since 1992 more than 20,000 new residential units have been built on the waterfront, with thousands more planned. New development and redevelopment provides an opportunity to incorporate public access goals. While New York City waterfront zoning requires private developers to build and maintain public access areas, the process through which this happens could better ensure that



projects address community interest and access goals. For example, redevelopment on the Greenpoint-Williamsburg waterfront presents a challenge and opportunity to incorporate waterfront access to be utilized in a variety of ways. If a developer wants to build infrastructure for docking boats and historic vessels, the developer should consult with the maritime community and waterfront experts to ensure that the facility is usable for a variety of boats, not just ferries. Nor should the developer or the City assume people simply want good views. An interdisciplinary process that involves the public and includes user input will ensure the waterfront is developed to incorporate a wide variety of uses that includes all types of boats, including those that are human powered such as kayaks. Beaches are also an important component of public access as they provide opportunities for human powered boating and passive recreation. Beaches should be restored and preserved wherever possible.

3. Improve transit connections to waterfront neighborhoods.

Creating new transit routes that can bring people to the water's edge is critical to opening the waterfront to public access. While new subway lines are impractical, alternative transportation modes—such as new bike lanes, extended bus routes, expanded greenways, pedestrian environments enhanced with wayfinding and traffic calming measures, and additional ferry service—can quickly and affordably facilitate connectivity to transit-poor waterfront neighborhoods.

4. Enhance pier and berthing facilities to accommodate more tall ships, as well as visiting historic and educational vessels.

Historic vessels are a unique cultural resource in New York City. These floating museums offer a variety of educational tours and programs promoting New York's maritime heritage. In order to better accommodate these vessels, publicly owned piers should be retrofitted with essential docking infrastructure including fendering, pile clusters, cleats and bollards, and gates. Guidelines are available for reference in the *New York City Comprehensive Waterfront Plan*. Enhanced visitor access and amenities at public piers would facilitate seamless integration between waterfront and on-water recreation and help bring more tall ships and historic vessels to New York's waterways.

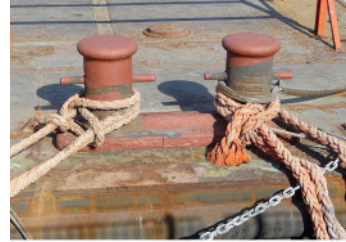


5. Allow for limited public access, or open view corridors, on waterfront lots whose uses are incompatible with public recreation.

Public access need not be incompatible with industrial or private uses along the water's edge. Recent projects such as the Newtown Creek Nature Walk and Barretto Point Park successfully balance business operations and public access along two of New York City's heavily industrial waterfronts. Creative design solutions at strategic points along the water's edge can enhance both maritime uses and public enjoyment of the waterfront. Public access in significant maritime and industrial areas can be designed to be non-intrusive and, where possible, complementary to the maritime and industrial businesses that are vital to the City's diverse economy.

6. Implement new funding mechanisms to cover capital improvements, ongoing maintenance, and operation of waterfront parks, as well as to fund the preservation of existing historic ships.

Given the current economic climate and chronic funding shortages, innovative financing mechanisms are key to developing great new waterfront spaces and infrastructure. For instance, leveraging the resources of private real estate developers has created new public waterfront space along Brooklyn's East River waterfront, while the public spaces in Battery Park City are largely paid for by the tenants of the surrounding residential and commercial towers. Moreover, commercial tenants can help collectively fund new waterfront spaces through the establishment of business improvement districts (BID), and tax increment financing (TIF) lets the City capitalize on projected increases in property values to fund public projects. Exploring the applicability of alternative means of financing will be critical to transforming the City's waterfront into a valuable public asset.



7. Alleviate waterfront permitting and regulatory challenges to help small waterfront businesses—including marinas, restaurants, and maritime-support businesses—to flourish.

To help with getting through regulatory challenges, a "One-Stop Shop" for permitting information must be developed. Instead of permittees having to check individual websites and guides for every state and municipal agency, they should instead be able to visit a central website that provides a comprehensive look at the permitting process as well as detailed information about requirements and regulations.



The website will show the role of each agency involved in waterfront permitting, provide flow charts of the permitting processes of each state, give tips on how to navigate the permitting process, describe the permits and certifications required for waterfront development, and explain the application process from start to finish.

These resources could be updated by multiple agencies in communication with each other to ensure consistency.

8. Waterfront Design Guidelines must be developed and used to influence waterfront development to ensure the waterfront is resilient, ecological, and built to provide public access.

Comprehensive waterfront design guidelines are needed immediately at this critical time after Superstorm Sandy. Decisions about how to design the edge and upland areas at public and private waterfront sites are being made every day and will continue to be made far into the future. Guidance and information is needed to direct what developers, architects, landscape architects, and others must consider



for ecological, publically accessible, and resilient waterfront edge design, going beyond what is minimally required by existing rules and regulations. Waterfront design guidelines, developed in conjunction with regulators will provide guidance and direction on how to, for example:

- Make sites floodable, allowing water to leave the site after inundation.
- Design sites to perform flood control functions for upland areas where appropriate.
- Protect areas or features on sites that cannot be flooded to be waterproof.
- Design features on sites to be either easily replaceable after inundation or able to structurally withstand inundation or wave action (such as benches or public access docks in public parks or public spaces).
- Enhance ecology of where the land meets the water using restoration principles such as the Target Ecosystem Characteristics of the Hudson Raritan Estuary Comprehensive Restoration Plan and those used at innovative sites such as Harlem River Park in Manhattan.
- Make surfaces that touch the water such as bulkheads habitable by marine organisms where appropriate.
- Provide access through docks, floating platforms, step-downs, or beaches for human powered and small boats.
- Provide access for large boats by preserving existing or installing new bollards, cleats and gates.
- Provide step-downs or stairs for humans to access the water in safe areas.



Conclusion

The *New York City Comprehensive Waterfront Plan* published in 2011 lays out the vision for the New York City waterfront. Numerous waterfront stakeholders have shaped that vision and significant improvements in waterfront access and development have already been implemented and completed in just the past few years. We encourage the next administration to continue and enhance this vision for the waterfront, especially looking at access opportunities in underserved boroughs and communities.